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'Ink in the the blood of the Macdonalds'

Andrew Wiseman investigates Rudyard Kipling's Skye Connection



In his acceptance speech for the award of LL.D. by the University of Edinburgh on Friday 9 July 1920, Rudyard Kipling jocularly downplayed his Scottish ties when 'he hastened to dissociate himself at once from anything complimentary that might have been said about Scotland up to date.' Although raising a laugh from the audience, Kipling's maternal line of descent came from the Macdonalds, a branch of Ostaig and Capsill of Sleat, from whom he took immeasurable pride.

The Chairman addressing the recipients of their honorary degrees, who were to be capped on the following day, referred to Kipling as 'a poet, a prophet, and a seer.' He continued that it 'seemed almost ridiculous to bring Mr Kipling to a University, because he was surely a university in himself. To him the students of any art or craft might learn

almost all that they wanted to know.'

Kipling deemed that although the speeches were good the Lord Provost's comments concerning local politics were a trifle parochial. Nevertheless, the Moderator in replying to Kipling's speech on behalf of the university spoke of Edinburgh having annexed an Englishman! Kipling was not best pleased and would later recall the incident:

...said nought but watched him deliver himself deeply into my hands. Next morn, he comes to me and says: "Am I rightly informed that your grandmother was a Macdonald?" "No," I said, "It was my mother, but how should you lowlanders know these things?" He was out of Midlothian and in a temperate way I danced on his carcass.

Surely a 'Celtic' One

Alice Kipling, Sheffield-born, was Kipling's Macdonald mother - something the Moderator found out the hard way. Kipling's ancestry was surely a 'Celtic' one for in his veins coursed many 'native' ethnicities including, of course, his Highland Macdonalds.

At an evening dinner reception, held after the formal conclusion of the morning graduation ceremony, Kipling met a more congenial man of the cloth, Dr Norman MacLean (1869-1952), who remarked, on being introduced to the renowned man of letters, that he was a native of Skye. MacLean later recalled that Kipling's eyes, under their shaggy eyebrows, suddenly lit up, and his face radiated goodwill. "I also," said he, "hail from the Isle of Skye." In vivid words, Kipling then told the minister of how an ancestor of his, John Macdonald, having fought for Prince Charlie, deemed it wise to emigrate, and how the ship on which he embarked was wrecked on the north coast of Ireland.

The Highland ancestry of Kipling, on his maternal side, begins with this clansman and his wife, Macdonald Jacobites who after the failed '45 Rising considered it prudent to emigrate from their native Skye to Canada; but their ship was wrecked off Ireland, where they landed and settled in Fermanagh. The son of that Skyeman was born in Ballinamallard, near Enniskillen, in 1764. James, in time, converted to Methodism and became a well-respected Wesleyan minister and was ordained in 1784.

Mixture of Highland, Irish and Welsh

He married Anne Browne in 1789 and their eldest son, George Browne Macdonald (1805 -1868), was born in Stockport. He too, in turn, became a minister and was twice married, his second wife being Hannah Jones (1809 -1875), Manchester-born but of Welsh stock. From that mixture of Highland, Irish, and Welsh, their eldest daughter, Alice Macdonald (1837 -1911), married Yorkshireman John Lockwood Kipling (1837/8 -1911). Their first-born, in Bombay, was Rudyard Kipling (1865 -1938).

Kipling is renowned for his short stories and poetry, particularly those about India, and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907. His popular writings include some later adapted for the cinema, such as *The Jungle Book* (1967) and his short story of the same name *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975). His childhood and his early working years were passed in India; and although his schooling was in England and his career cosmopolitan, he never forgot his heather roots.

A columnist, Ion S Munro, met one of Kipling's relatives at a lunchtime gathering of the Kipling Society in London during the early 1950s and found himself sitting next to a demure and shy elderly lady. She was Miss Florence Macdonald, a first cousin as well as his playmate in his early years, and often his companion in later days. Intrigued why Kipling's Skye connection had never really been written about despite a great deal of articles being published about him, Munro enquired whether or not Kipling ever took stock of his Macdonald lineage and how much could be attributed to his Celtic forebears.

The reserved diffidence of my neighbour vanished at my query. She turned to me with an altered gaze. "Of course Rudyard and all of us were deeply conscious and proud of our clanship with the Macdonalds." She declared, "It was the Celt in him which lay behind the visions and dream-realities of very much of his writings in prose, poetry, and verse. But don't forget that to those influences were added the Yorkshire qualities of his father's descent.

Scottish Descent

When Kipling went over some of Florence's own poetical efforts, his comments could be blunt as well as constructive. While he dismissed one poem by saying "Not a good line in it, my dear," he then picked up another piece and was full of praise: "But this is damned good." He concluded by dint of hard work and practice that she would someday write good verse, adding: "You see, there's ink in the blood of the Macdonalds." Here Kipling was tracing back his literacy skills to his Scottish descent.

To Alice, the Macdonald lineage was so vital that her final request was that the legend on her tombstone should read, 'Alice Macdonald wife of John Lockwood Kipling.' Alice along with her younger three sisters, Georgina (1840 -1920), Agnes (1843 -1906) and Louisa (1845 -1925) were untypical Victorian women. These four sisters married into well-to-do and influential families.

Georgina, the most famous of the Macdonald sisters and a talented woodcut artist in her own right, married Sir Edward Burne-Jones, a pre-Raphaelite painter. Agnes's husband, Sir Edward Poynter, became the director of the National Gallery and later the president of the Royal Academy. Louisa married Alfred Baldwin and was the mother of the British Prime Minister, Sir Stanley Baldwin. Edith (1848 -1937), the youngest, remained a spinster.

Literary Legacy

Although Kipling's father could be more indulgent with his son, Rudyard looked to his mother for inspiration as he began crafting his literary skills. She acted as reader, editor, censor and critic of his earliest attempts. Recent scholarship has tried to downplay her influence on Kipling's life and work. This would be understating her sheer determination to make not only her husband's career a success, but also that of her son. She expected nothing less than the very highest of standards and as a result Kipling strived to do his best and his literary legacy in no small way pays dividends to her early influence.

It was not from the potters of Staffordshire that Kipling derived his genius, but from his mother whose vitality and imaginative power were such that of her a Viceroy of India once said, "Dullness and Mrs Kipling cannot exist in the same room." Perhaps it may be an overstatement to say that Kipling's mother had a Macdonald trait with her independent nature and steely determination to succeed. Clearly, though, her forebears came partly from a line of antecedents who may be described as over-achievers, people who wanted to elevate themselves by talent, drive and utter ambition to succeed. Kipling himself was later to personify these attributes. ■



Rudyard Kipling and Alice, his mother, aged 53, in 1890

Further Information

Judith Flanders: *A Circle of Sisters: Alice Kipling, Georgina Burne Jones, Agnes Poynter, and Louisa Baldwin* (Penguin Books 2002)

Ina Taylor: *Victorian Sisters* (George Weidenfield & Nicolson 1987)
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